

Pulling together while working apart

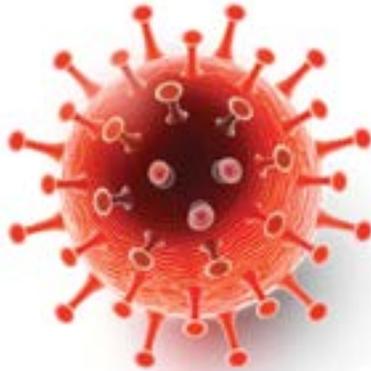
Communities, utilities respond amidst pandemic

Member utilities of the Nebraska Municipal Power Pool are used to responding to emergencies due to physical outages from storms and other occurrences. A global pandemic, however, is a different kind of emergency.

Utilities and municipalities across the nation are responding to the crisis on multiple fronts, keeping municipal employees and utility workers as safe as possible while ensuring a reliable electric system to keep the lights on and homes and businesses heated.

Many utilities voluntarily implemented policies to temporarily eliminate utility disconnections during the pandemic as well as close offices and encourage online or drop box bill payment to adhere to social distancing guidelines.

Colorado and Iowa issued mandated utility disconnection orders as most utilities were already voluntarily suspending disconnection policies. Nebraska and Wyoming have not issued mandatory suspension of disconnections, but most utilities in those states are doing so voluntarily.



COVID-19
CORONAVIRUS

A survey was developed and distributed among Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska (MEAN) participants regarding utility responses to the pandemic, including activity related to disconnection policies, and keeping personnel safe.

NMPP Energy response

The NMPP Energy building remains closed, staying open only for a few employees. After in-house training, most staff headed home to serve members from makeshift home offices with the goal of providing the same level of services to member communities as if the office was fully open. Travel and in-person meetings remain suspended to further protect employees and member communities.

The tough decision to cancel the 2020 NMPP Energy Annual Conference was made a week before the conference in March. The NMPP Board

COVID-19 Information Hub for Municipalities/Utilities

NMPPEnergy.org

NMPP Energy's website has a live listing of categorized resources to assist utilities and municipalities regarding COVID-19.

of Directors held its Annual Meeting via a seamless teleconference call in March, which allowed for the appointment of vacant Board positions and the scheduling of future Annual Conferences. All NMPP Energy board and committee meetings scheduled for May, which include MEAN, ACE, NMPP and the Joint Operating Committee meeting, will be held by teleconference.

Communication was sent to NMPP Energy constituents to pro-

See 'PULLING TOGETHER' on page 6

NMPP Energy named among “Best Places to Work” in Lincoln

Team shares passionate purpose: Serving members

NMPP Energy has been named among the “Best Places to Work” in the medium-sized business category for 2020 in Lincoln, Neb., by Woods Aitken LLP, the Lincoln Journal Star and the Lincoln Human Resources Management Association.

NMPP Energy is the trade name for a member-driven coalition of four organizations serving nearly 200 member communities in six Midwest and Rocky Mountain states. The organizations are:

- Nebraska Municipal Power Pool (utility-related services)
- Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska (wholesale electric supply)
- National Public Gas Agency (wholesale natural gas supply)
- ACE - Public Alliance for Community Energy (retail natural gas supply)

Collectively, the organizations subscribe to the core philosophies of local control and working together to provide reliable, cost-based energy and energy-related services.

The Best Places to Work program, which started in 2013, recognizes local companies that, through a third-party administered employee survey, rank their respective companies as being the best places to work. The areas surveyed include workplace environment, leadership direc-



tion, culture and management practices.

“This award is a reflection of the passion our team has to serve our member communities,” said NMPP Energy Executive Director/CEO Bob Poehling. “We work for our members – small municipalities that come together to work as a group in finding solutions to move forward. Our team is extremely passionate and proud to assist them.”

NMPP Energy was recognized for its workplace environment and culture that emphasizes five cultural elements into its daily work focusing on its member communities, customer service, economic value, professional values and staff work-life balance. NMPP Energy’s team of more than 50 employees collaborate to serve its member communities. Through it’s culture, team members grow, laugh, rise to challenges, thrive and share immense purpose, passion and pride in assisting its member communities.

ACE wraps up Choice Gas selection period

ACE, the Public Alliance for Community Energy, wrapped up another Nebraska Choice Gas campaign as a competitive natural gas supplier in the program’s two-week selection period which ran April-10-23.

During the selection period customers can choose their natural gas supplier for the gas year, which runs June 1-May 31. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique challenge during the selection period, causing staff to adapt by taking calls and working remotely.

There were seven natural gas suppliers competing during the selection period, the most in the program’s history. More results from the selection period and ACE’s campaign will be provided at the upcoming ACE Board teleconference meeting set for May 20.

PSC workshop set for June

The Nebraska Public Service Commission is planning a workshop on June 17 in Lincoln, Neb., to receive feedback and review the Choice Gas program.

The workshop may provide direction for changes for the 2021-22 program. ACE staff will provide feedback to the PSC and attend the workshop.



By Bob Poehling,
Executive Director



Work Continues at NMPP Energy

As the COVID-19 pandemic moves through the country, the past couple months have been anything but typical for everyone, including at NMPP Energy. The majority of NMPP Energy staff has transitioned to working remotely while continuing to serve member communities as seamlessly as possible.

Despite the major disruption in daily lives, work continues to get done. Below is a list of a few of the activities and workstreams that occurred during the past couple months at NMPP Energy on behalf of member communities:

Nebraska Municipal Power Pool

- Rate study work was performed for Lamar and Gunnison, Colo., Gillette, Wyo., Grand Island, Stromsburg, West Point, Crete and Nebraska City, Neb., and Carlisle and Denver, Iowa.
- Annual Department of Energy reports were prepared and submitted on behalf of some member communities.
- The NMPP Members Council was emailed a resolution of “Action Without Meeting by Written Consent”. This document allows Members Council representatives, alternates or an elected official to approve the NMPP budget without having to meet.
- The PowerManager website is being redesigned and moved to a new platform.
- Remote sessions are being held with PowerManager software users.
- The NMPP Board of Directors held its annual meeting by teleconference in March.

Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska

- COVID-19 email communication is being shared with the MEAN Board of Directors, Committee Members and MEAN City Clerks regarding NMPP Energy’s response, electric utility operations and contingency planning and legislative updates.
- NMPP/MEAN utility training sessions were held in Sidney, Broken Bow and Lincoln in early March on a variety of topics.
- The Nebraska Power Review Board approved MEAN’s petition for Charter Amendment 35,

which adds the Town of Oak Creek, Colo., and removes the City of Wood River, Neb., as a voting member of MEAN and updates the list of representatives serving as directors on the MEAN Board.

- Staff attended various wholesale market-related meetings, conferences/teleconference and training sessions.
- Preparation is underway for MEAN’s May Board and Committee meetings, which will be held via teleconference.

National Public Gas Agency

- Seasonal supply was finalized for the Colorado Interstate Gas Pipeline and Tallgrass Interstate Gas Transmission.
- Staff continues to monitor the Northern Natural Gas rate case through the Midwest Region Gas Task Force. The rate case will ultimately set transportation rates for Lyons, Pender and Stromsburg in Nebraska.
- New rates were negotiated for NPGA members served by the Tallgrass Interstate Gas Transmission pipeline which results in an estimated \$26,000 annual savings.
- NPGA re-committed to the Shippers Group on the Southern Star pipeline in anticipation of the potential for a rate case in 2021.
- Staff is participating in American Public Gas Association’s weekly conference calls, allowing for sharing of policies, procedures and federal regulation related to COVID-19.

Public Alliance for Community Energy

- ACE wrapped up operations in the Choice Gas Selection period, which ran April 10-23. Prior to the selection period, several training sessions were held to prepare staff.
- Staff attended a Nebraska Choice Gas information sharing session hosted by the Laurel, Neb., Community Senior Center.
- ACE held its annual voting on social media for its Projects of the Year Awards. The awards were presented in late March to the winning communities of Loup City and Ord, Neb.
- Preparations are underway for the May 20 Board meeting to be held via teleconference.

Fitch upgrades MEAN's bond rating to 'A+'

Fitch Ratings in March upgraded its Issuer Default Rating on power supply revenue bonds issued by the Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska from 'A' to 'A+' and included a stable outlook rating.

The rating upgrade reflects the improved credit quality of MEAN's largest participants, which have showed improved cash flows and declining leverage metrics. The rating also reflects MEAN's long-term, all-requirements contracts with its long-term Schedule M members and MEAN's autonomous rate-setting ability.

"MEAN's financial profile remains healthy and Fitch expects MEAN's leverage ratio, as measured by net adjusted debt to adjusted funds available for debt

S&P affirms MEAN's 'A' rating

S&P Global Ratings in March affirmed its 'A' long-term rating on the Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska's bond obligations outstanding. The rating outlook is stable. The rating report cited:

- The stability and diversity of MEAN's revenue streams with 69 participants in four states and with about 84 percent of total electric sale revenue related to 54 long-term Schedule M total requirements participants;
- Robust liquidity with adequate days of operating expenses; and
- An experienced management team with strong financial policies and practices.

The report stated a key driver to the opinion's stable outlook is MEAN's historically consistent debt service coverage, MEAN's strong rate-setting practices and the stability and diversity of MEAN's customer base.

service, will support a strong financial profile following a moderate decline in energy sales," stated

the report. "MEAN continues to provide a low cost and diversified power supply to its members."

NMPP Board holds Annual Meeting via teleconference

The Nebraska Municipal Power Pool Board of Directors held their Annual Meeting March 25 by teleconference call due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Board received an update on the 2020 NMPP Energy Annual Conference that was canceled due to the pandemic. The Board approved booking hotel accommodations in downtown Lincoln for future Conference dates through 2024. The cybersecurity and employee recruitment and retention ses-

NMPP Board Notes

sions planned for the conference may be scheduled later in 2020 as a free one-day workshop at NMPP Energy for members.

The Board also appointed Board members to fill three vacancies for the 2020-21 fiscal year which runs April 1-March 31. The three appointees and their population category were:

- Rick Rigel, general manager, **Arkansas River Power Au-**

thority (20,000-plus population)

- Jeff Kohrs, general manager, **Nebraska City Utilities** (more than 5,000-less than 20,000)
- Edward Dunn, City of **Grant, Neb.** (less than 5,000)

Prior to the Board Meeting, the NMPP Members Council approved the NMPP 2020-21 budget through a ballot process, which is allowed by the NMPP by-laws in situations where the Members Council cannot hold its annual meeting and caucus.

PMA emergency funding assistance should not be recovered in rates

Letters were recently sent to our U.S. Senators requesting to treat all emergency funds for the Federal Power Marketing Administrations (PMAs,) the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Bureau of Reclamation on par with funding for other federal agencies and explicitly stipulate that funds provided may not be recovered in rates from customers of the Federal Power Program.

The Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska (MEAN) serves approximately 54 communities receiving federal hydropower allocations from PMAs in the Midwest.

PMAs are a valuable renewable energy resource for the Midwest and communities served by MEAN. They provide millions of Americans served by public power utilities with cost-based hydroelectric power produced at federal dams. PMA rates are cost-based, set to cover all generation and transmission costs as well as repayment of the federal investment. None of the costs are borne by taxpayers. For many decades, these partnerships have benefitted the federal government and public power utilities, their retail customers and communities.

We appreciate efforts to provide stimulus funds for federal

agencies during the COVID-19 emergency. NMPP recently asked our Congressional representatives to recognize that, unless otherwise noted, additional funds provided to the PMAs, the Corps, and Reclamation's hydropower programs may be recovered in rates by electric customers, which is likely an unintended outcome. If PMAs must recover these additional expenditures in rates, ultimately end-use electric customers will see rate increases at a time when many are facing economic impacts from COVID-19, including reduced electricity load.

Paycheck Protection Program for Small Businesses

When small businesses and entrepreneurs ask for COVID-19 Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds it might or might not be free money.

The program provides small businesses 100 percent federally guaranteed loans to continue to pay employees and cover other business expenses during the COVID-19 crisis. Under the program loan payments are deferred for six months, accruing one percent interest during that time. Startups should apply in consultation with their lawyers and banks. The loan may be forgiven by the federal government if 75 percent of those funds are for payroll costs within eight weeks.

The program is designed to get paychecks to those working in small businesses quickly. A suggestion recently given to a small

business was to create separate banking business accounts to track this money and establish a good record for the future.

Many utilities suspending disconnection policies

Many of NMPP Energy's municipal utilities selling electricity and natural gas are suspending residential disconnections of customers who do not pay their bills during the COVID-19 crisis, without an order by regulators or other government officials.

Under local control each utility can work with its customers to suspend disconnections and are working with them to make reasonable efforts to restore them if needed.

NMPP, along with our national public power and natural gas groups are directly asking our communities to suspend disconnects knowing that municipal and smaller utilities are not generally under regulatory bodies or commissions. Some of the communities are suspending late fees and reconnection charges during the COVID-19 crisis. Government bodies have ordered mandatory disconnection suspension in Colorado and Iowa.

* * *

Chris Dibbern is general counsel of NMPP Energy. Contact her at cdibbern@nmppenergy.org or (800) 234-2595.

Legislative Notes



By Chris Dibbern

Pulling together while working apart

Continued from page 1

vide updates on staff's remote working situation and company activities. NMPP Energy's website includes an evolving list of useful federal, state, electric and natural gas sector and economic development resources for municipalities and communities regarding the pandemic.

Regional wholesale power markets

The regional wholesale power markets where MEAN operates took steps to ensure continuous operation of the bulk electric grid, maintaining sufficient capacity to serve electric load. With more people transitioning to working at home, the Southwest Power Pool (SPP) reported a shift in load patterns to a later morning peak and has experienced approximately a 4-6 percent reduction in load across its system during the first couple weeks of April. SPP

also reported seeing an uptick in the cancellation of planned generation and transmission outages. It continues to work closely with its members and market participants to adjust to real-time conditions to facilitate reliability over the long term.

The MidContinent Independent System Operator (MISO) reported experiencing a reduction of approximately six percent of total energy consumed across its footprint and a change in its load shape with longer morning and evening peaks and occurring at different times. These changes are attributed to the reduction in industrial and manufacturing demand and communities on stay-at-home status.

Mutual aid assistance stands ready

NMPP's Mutual Aid Program stands ready to help member utilities that need assistance.

The program can coordinate utility assistance in response to storm recovery, workforce disruptions due to COVID-19, equipment needs or other emergencies that may arise.

To request assistance through the program, contact Rich Eymann, NMPP Electrical Distribution O&M Specialist, at (402) 473-8207 or reymann@nmppenergy.org.

ACE adapts to participate in Choice Gas Selection Period

Staff working on ACE's Choice Gas Selection Period adapted to the pandemic by transitioning to a remote work environment.

Training was held remotely for staff and the two-week selection period was held as originally scheduled April 10-23. For more details on ACE's selection period, see page 2.

In Memoriam

Ty Abernethy

Ty Abernethy, former city administrator for the City of Mitchell, Neb., and active representative within the organizations of NMPP Energy, passed away March 4 at the age of 69 in Fort Worth, Texas following a stroke.

Ty served the City of Mitchell for 29 years in various roles before retiring in 2015, including

servicing as city administrator his last 14 years. He served on the boards of the Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska



Ty Abernethy

(MEAN) and the Public Alliance for Community Energy for several years, including as MEAN

Secretary/Treasurer for seven years, MEAN Board Vice Chair for three years and MEAN Board Chair for two years. He was a recipient of MEAN's Rudy Hultgren Dedicated Service Award for his dedication and work in the public power industry.

A memorial service is being planned for June in Mitchell.

Support NMPP member communities through the Champions Business Program

Champions are businesses and organizations that support NMPP Energy's effort to provide products and services to members. Consider these businesses when your utility or municipality has a business need. If your business is interested in becoming an NMPP Energy Champion, call Andrew Ross at (800) 234-2595.



Champions Business Directory of Services

Financial

Ameritas Investment Corp. (Ameritas.com)..... Omaha, Neb.
D.A. Davidson & Co. (dadavidson.com/ficm) Omaha, Neb.
First National Bank (Firstnational.com) Omaha, Neb.
UNICO Group, Inc. and Midlands Financial Benefits (unicogroup.com) Lincoln, Neb.
Nebraska Energy Federal Credit Union (ne-fcu.org) Columbus, Neb.

Regulatory/Compliance

Air Regulation Consulting (airregconsulting.com) Lincoln, Neb.
NAQS Environmental Experts (naqs.com) Lincoln, Neb.

Utility/Community

Dogwood Energy Columbia, Md.
EnergySolutions, Inc. (energysolutions-inc.com) Omaha, Neb.
Hometown Connections, Inc. (Hometownconnections.com) Lakewood, Colo.
Foundation for Educational Services (fes.org) Lincoln, Neb.
GenPro Energy Solutions (GenProEnergy.com) Piedmont, S.D.
JK Energy Consulting, LLC (JKenergyconsulting.com) Lincoln, Neb.
Border States (borderstates.com) Fargo, N.D.
NovaTech (Novatechweb.com) Lenexa, Kan.
PDS, Inc. (PDSinc.biz) Omaha, Neb.
Protective Equipment Testing Laboratory (petl.com) Great Bend, Kan.
RESCO (Rural Electric Supply Cooperative) (resco1.com) Ankeny, Iowa
Sol Systems (solsystems.com) Washington, D.C.
Solomon Corporation (Solomoncorp.com) Solomon, Kan.

Computer/Technology

Proteus (Proteus.co) Lincoln, Neb.
Salt Creek Software, Inc. (Saltcreek.com) Lincoln, Neb.

Engineering

Exponential Engineering Company (exponentialengineering.com) Fort Collins, Colo.
Halker Consulting (Halker.com) Centennial, Colo.
JEO Consulting Group, Inc. (jeo.com) Wahoo, Neb.
Lutz, Daily & Brain, LLC (ldbeng.com) Overland Park, Kan.
Olsson (Olsson.com) Lincoln, Neb.
Shermco Industries (Shermco.com) Omaha, Neb.

Insurance

League Association of Risk Management (larmpool.org) Lincoln, Neb.

Legal

Chapman and Cutler, LLP (chapman.com) Salt Lake City, Utah
Spiegel & McDiarmid (spiegelmcd.com) Washington, D.C.

Telecommunication

Community Broadband Action Network (broadbandaction.com) Indianola, Iowa
River Oaks Communications Corp. (rivoaks.com) Centennial, Colo.



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Employment Opportunities

Payroll Clerk/Secretary
City of St. Paul, Neb.

Utility Worker
Village of Callaway, Neb.

Electric Distribution Lineman
City of Sutton, Neb.

Electric Superintendent
Town of Springfield, Colo.

Electrical Department Foreman
City of Sutton, Neb.

City Administrator
City of Gering, Neb.

Upcoming Teleconference Meetings

- May 14 MEAN Finance Comm.
- May 20ACE Board
- May 20MEAN Committees
- May 21 MEAN Board
- May 27 JOC meeting
- May 28 NMPP Board

Job descriptions are posted at
www.nmppenergy.org/careers/member_communities

To submit an employment ad: NMPP members may advertise job openings for free in the Essent newsletter. The deadline is the 15th of each month to run the following month. E-mail kwickham@nmppenergy.org.

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